

# **Aquaguide: Stockpiled Bass:**

## **A Common Pondowner Complaint**

---

Missouri has over 300,000 privately owned ponds and lakes that could provide many fishing opportunities. Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) fisheries employees receive calls daily from frustrated pond owners unhappy with the low numbers of big largemouth bass that their ponds produce.

A pondowner will typically complain, "I have an acre pond on my property. Three or four years ago, we caught a lot of two and three pound bass. We didn't keep any fish less than 12 inches long. Now we can only catch little bass. Did we harvest all the large bass?" After a few questions about their pond, their fishing habits and the sizes of other fish in the pond, it becomes evident the pond has a stockpiled bass population.

### **Stockpiled Bass**

A stockpiled bass population contains an over-abundance of slow- growing bass, that do not reach a large size because there is not enough food.

Ponds with stockpiled bass populations are characterized by numerous 8- to 12-inch bass. The fish obtain enough food to stay alive, but not enough to grow very much. These fish may have long, skinny bodies, hollow bellies and disproportionately large heads. Many people assume that these are young fish; however, they may be several years old. Most will die of natural causes without ever reaching a desirable size. The practice of releasing these fish to grow bigger only compounds the problem, because this condition most often occurs when adequate numbers of smaller bass are not harvested.

High numbers of small bass can result from a number of circumstances. The most common situation involves a pond where bass harvest is very limited and bass reproduction is very good. Under these circumstances, bluegill, a favorite prey of bass, cannot produce enough young to adequately feed the large numbers of bass. If bluegill are absent, the situation is usually more severe.

Other factors, such as water clarity and excessive levels of aquatic vegetation, can lead to slow growth and stockpiling of bass. Largemouth bass are sight feeders, therefore muddy water and excessive quantities of aquatic plants keep bass from capturing enough food to maintain adequate growth.

Conversely, bluegill may grow large in a pond with stockpiled largemouth bass. The few small bluegill that escape being eaten will grow to a large size because they don't have to compete against hordes of other bluegill for available food.

### **Stockpiling Solutions**

If bass underharvest and high reproduction are the problems, the first thing a pondowner should

do is increase bass harvest. A common harvest regulation used in this situation is a slot length limit. Anglers should be encouraged to harvest fish less than 12 inches long, but to return to the water, unharmed, all fish between 12 and 15 inches. Bass longer than 15 inches long may be harvested or released depending on angler preference.

Removing many of the smaller bass makes more food available for the remaining fish.

The net effect of the slot length limit is to reduce the number of stockpiled bass and improve overall bass growth.

Landowners south of the Missouri River should harvest 20-25 bass per acre per year. Those with ponds in north Missouri (where soils are richer and pond fish populations larger) should harvest 30-35 bass per acre per year. One experienced angler can harvest the desired number of fish in a one half-acre pond. Owners with larger ponds and lakes may seek assistance from friends and other anglers to harvest enough fish. Scout groups and other youth and civic organizations are good sources of willing anglers. Be sure to observe the daily limit of 6 bass.

If bluegill stocking is required, add about 200 fish at least 4 inches long per acre. Bluegill should be protected from harvest for at least two years. Increasing the harvest of bass usually results in greater production of young bluegill, which in turn, will lead to increased bass growth. Returning a stockpiled bass lake or pond to good fishing condition takes time. Patience is important; it may take several years to restore a balanced fish population in a small pond and even longer in a large lake.

The following table can help you to determine whether your pond has a stockpiled bass population. Go fishing at least five different times throughout the fishing season. For bass, use a variety of artificial lures, minnows or crayfish. Worms or crickets on a small hook are good baits for catching bluegill.

Selective harvest of fish, in addition to good record keeping (see our Aquaguide on "Good Record Keeping Means Better Fishing"), should help maintain the quality largemouth bass fishing most pondowners desire. For more information on pond or lake management, contact your local MDC fisheries personnel.

---

Last Revision Date: 01/16/97